

NP, NSC, Pres. Trip Files,
Box 479, Folder: Briefing Bk,
Visit of Nixon to Iran, May '72

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PA/HO Department of State
E.O. 12958, as amended
June 21, 2006

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May 18, 1972

[Tab B]

IRAQ

Iraqi Politics in Perspective

Chronic instability and an extremist nationalism bordering on the xenophobic have led Iraq to be regarded as about the most unreliable and least realistic of Mid-East states, even in the view of other Arabs. This has meant not only Iraq's isolation within the Arab world but also ambivalent and unsteady relations with the outside world and great powers, including the Soviet Union.

The reasons for this legacy are not ones likely to vanish in the short-term future: At its birth, mandate Iraq never constituted an harmonious national entity and its society remains today severely split along ethnic and religious lines; Kurdish irredentism is one serious example. British mandate and the British-installed monarchy found a solution only in harsh and imposed rule and the continual jockeying of forces within Iraq; all efforts to cultivate a broad-based government or political constituency failed. In turn, Iraqi nationalist leadership evolved with the same militaristic mentality and inability to resolve internal divisiveness except through force. Additionally, in reaction to the long years of Western domination, Iraqi nationalists developed an unusually intense hatred for foreign (then Western, but later also Soviet) influence. The Arab/Israeli problem in particular intensified anti-Western sentiments.

Further, the Iraqi nationalist movement--like Iraqi society and like the Arab nationalist movement in general--was itself never capable of unity. No single individual (a Nasser) or single nationalist orientation has ever emerged. Baghdad, Cairo and Damascus have traditionally contested for pre-eminence in the Arab world and varying generations of Iraqi nationalists held conflicting views on Iraq's proper bent, some wishing to obliterate all other Arab influences within Iraq, some intent on pan-Arab unity at any cost. Influence struggles among Iraqi officers led to increasing fragmentation and conflicting Iraqi strategies, both within and without.

In reaction to internal schisms and perceived external threats (either foreign or other Arab), Iraq has produced a generation of wildly nationalistic and erratic military dictators whose power plays and purge of opposition have steadily decreased the size of the power base and increased the precarious

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nature of any hold on leadership by those who triumphed.

Regimes since the monarchy was toppled in 1958 have thus been basically unstable. They have used force against every segment of society, including the communists, to consolidate power. To the degree they have been radically nationalistic, Iraqi regimes have moved backwards and forwards in their relations with other Arab states and with the great powers. The Soviets, who embraced the cause immediately in 1958 and began large-scale economic and military assistance, found themselves at various times loved and unloved, as communists (who themselves have been brutal in Iraq) were being purged or as overtures were being made to the West. Over the years, too, Iraqi regimes have approached Damascus, Cairo and Amman for unity pacts; as those nationalisms held influence in Iraq and presented an internal threat, Iraqi regimes would back off.

The 1967 war caused another convulsion within Iraq after a few years of relative calm and even near cordial relations with the US. The passions of that war unleashed the most leftist nationalists and by 1968 the Baathis (who also dominate in Syria) consolidated in power and remain there today. Generally speaking, all good Baathis ascribe in excess to the Arab nationalist principles of unity, socialism, liberty and revolution and to the theory that the Arab world is an indivisible political, social and economic whole. It is perceived as a purely Arab movement and therefore incompatible with Communism; in fact, during a short-lived Baathi regime in 1963 in Iraq, there occurred the most brutal attacks on local communists in modern Iraqi history.

Nevertheless, the current Baath leadership has taken a number of pragmatic steps internally (overtures to the Kurds and to the communists) and externally (closer alignment with the Soviets and overtures towards Syria and Egypt) which could lengthen the life of its regime -- assuming these work and the normal forces which have always torn Iraq apart can be repressed. The reports of brutality and internal purge that emanate from this regime are especially depressing.

Two men appear to be the foci of power: President Bakr, commander of the armed forces and head of the military wing of the Baathis; and Saddam Hussein Tikriti, civilian Baath leader and virtual king of the Iraqi security apparatus. Bakr is thought to be an Iraqi-firster, opposed to excessive Soviet or pro-Nasserist influence and is believed to want better relations

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with Baathist Syria. Tikriti is known as a hardliner on consolidating Baath pre-eminence and is believed to be the strongman at the moment. It was Tikriti who evidently initiated and then negotiated the friendship treaty with the Soviets.

Regional Relations

Iraq's relations in the area have been notoriously poor. It has been snubbed from two directions:

(1) Iraq and Iran have sustained perpetual operations across their common border, though both sides contain actions to fall short of a major confrontation. Mutual distrust is partly historical and cultural. More importantly, the Shah views the unstable and radical character of the Baathis and their vulnerability to Soviet influence as a serious threat to Iran and its position in the Gulf. He has backed coup attempts, conducted provocations along the border and supported the Kurdish rebellion to keep Iraqi regimes off-guard.

In the past, the Iraqis have not contributed significantly to trouble in the Gulf. However, with the departure of the British, the Baathis have campaigned vociferously as its Arab protectors and have further alarmed the Shah. Their noise stimulated the otherwise reluctant Arabs to take the issue of the Shah's seizure of the islands at the mouth of the Gulf to the Security Council late last year. They may also feel the Soviet treaty will give them greater weight in the area. Finally, Iraq has some scare power over its weaker neighbors such as Kuwait, causing the latter to waffle on issues important to the Shah (the islands).

On balance, the Iraqis might have the potential for a greater influence in the Gulf. However, their own record of instability, inability to cooperate with other Arabs and xenophobic instincts, which could lead them to snap back even at the Soviets, could be the checks.

(2) Iraq and the Arab world have had unhappy relations. In addition to Baghdad's traditional rivalries with Cairo and Damascus, its excesses and cruel tactics of leadership have alienated all segments

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of the Arab world. Its strong rhetoric coupled with a distinct lack of involvement in the Arab/Israeli dispute have earned it zero credibility on that score. Iraq has never accepted Resolution 242 and has bitterly denounced its Arab neighbors for involvement in negotiating efforts.

Discounted as both useless and obnoxious, Iraq has found itself in a position of isolation. Recently, however, the Baathis have made overtures towards ending this isolation. For one thing, some regard the Soviet treaty as an effort by the regime to enhance lagging credibility both at home and within the Arab world, in a manner emulating the Egyptians. There is also reason to believe the Soviets are pressing Iraq to move closer to Syria and Egypt -- which would make sense to the Soviets whose first loyalties are to Egypt. Also, capitalizing on Arab reactions to Hussein's West Bank plan, Iraq has called for a united front between Iraq, Syria and Egypt. The response has not been overwhelming since, of course, Syria, Egypt and Libya are already in a confederation; at a minimum, however, the initiative has generated dialogue among the three capitals which is by itself an accomplishment for Iraq.

It remains to be seen whether under this regime Iraq can play any more of a useful role in the area than it has in the past.

Soviet Presence

Before 1958, military and economic assistance to Iraq came entirely from the West. Since 1958, it has come overwhelmingly from the Soviets and Eastern Europe, though a modest Western program has survived. Since 1958, some \$1 billion in communist military assistance has been committed, the bulk from the USSR (making Iraq second only to Egypt as the most active Mid East recipient) and close to a billion (\$830 million) in economic assistance, the lion's share of which has gone to Iraq's potentially rich oil industry.

The Soviets provided the greatest support to the 1958 coup and offered immediate economic and military aid; the regime, fearing Western or Baghdad Power intervention, accepted and thus an orientation towards the USSR was established from the outset. However, relations have been

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rocky, depending on the vagaries of a given regime. They peaked in the first few years after the 1958 coup as both Soviet assistance and support of local communists were needed by the new regime, then ebbed and flowed in the early sixties as other less radical regimes reversed those trends and balanced off Iraq's posture with the West.

They peaked again after the 1967 war. However, the bulk of post-war assistance has been arranged under the current Baath regime following a decision by that regime in early 1969 to permit the Soviets a long-term role in the development of Iraq's richest oil fields. Since that decision, the largest Soviet economic (most for oil) and military commitments ever have been made, one set in 1969 and one set in 1971.

--Military capability: Despite large-scale Soviet assistance, the Iraqis have not been particularly successful in absorbing sophisticated weaponry, though training is continuing. According to our intelligence estimates, Iraqi armed forces are capable of maintaining internal security and defending its borders against attacks by its Arab neighbors, but could not withstand attack by Turkey or Iran. Specifically: (a) The Iraqi Army has limited offensive capabilities and could not sustain significant operations in the Arab-Israeli theater. (b) Iraq's air defense system is almost nonexistent. They could not operate the SA-2 and resold it to Egypt in 1962. However, they are now promised the SA-3. They do possess a potential strategic capability with Badger aircraft. (c) The Navy is capable of conducting small-scale patrol operations along the coast and causing harassment. Any real combat capability of the navy is nil. Generally, the Iraqis suffer from weaknesses common to all Arabs.

Early this year the Soviet-Iraqi friendship treaty was concluded and, as with the Egyptian and Indian treaties, it has been billed as nothing surprising or sudden but rather a culmination of existing relationships. The standard parts of the treaty are like those of the Egyptian and Indian treaties calling for a wide range of cooperation in political, economic and military fields and regular consultations on important issues for the purpose of coordinating their stands. [None of the three specifically provides for mutual assistance or military coordination in the event of hostilities, however.]

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Special tailoring of the Soviet-Iraqi treaty appears in several areas.

(a) The military paragraph states that both sides will "continue to develop cooperation in the field of strengthening the defense capabilities of each." The Indian treaty has no defense commitment; the Egyptian treaty is targeted more specifically at Soviet assistance to Egypt. The Iraqi treaty suggests the Soviets found language that could stretch to cover Soviet base facilities in Iraqi ports, if they are granted, though the military language is more general than that of the Egyptian treaty. (b) There is no clause from the Egyptian treaty calling for a just Mid-East peace in accordance with UN principles; rather the Soviets signed on to a statement calling for an unrelenting struggle against Zionism and imperialism. On the other hand, the Iraqis did agree to preambular language stating both parties believed world problems should be solved by cooperation and solutions acceptable to concerned parties. This is mild language for the Baath but probably required of them to meet Soviet needs.

--For the Iraqi part, it appears they were the instigators of the treaty discussions. Tikriti's regime has been in trouble at home and isolated within the Arab world. Formalizing Soviet support may have been viewed as enhancing the internal position of the Baath as well as putting it in a position to have greater influence in the Arab world and in the Persian Gulf.

--For the Soviet part, they have demonstrated interest in consolidating assets in the area for which they have long been picking up the tab, at a time when the US and USSR are moving to summit dialogue and when the Chinese are beginning to enter the Mid-East scene. However, it appears this move (which may even have been reluctant) has not been entirely without caution: (a) First, the Soviets have been at pains to stress that the treaty is not aimed at any other country. This, of course, is to protect Soviet relations with Iran. We have reason to believe the Soviets refused a request by Tikriti that the Soviets guarantee to intervene in the event Iraq is attacked by Iran. (b) Second, the Soviets are believed to have pressed Tikriti to do two things if a treaty were to be signed: First, he is to work on stabilizing the internal front by getting the Kurds and local communists into a national front government with the Baath. The Kurds, who have been seeking autonomy for a decade, have been one of the worst threats to Iraqi stability; while the Baath reached an accord for Kurd

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participation in government in 1970, it has never been implemented since the Kurds remain highly skeptical of what will happen to them under the Baath. They are refusing recent pleas made by Tikriti under Soviet pressure. The Soviets would also like to see local communists -- excluded and/or purged under the Baath -- more fully integrated. Second, the Soviets are believed to be pressing Tikriti to improve relations with Egypt and Syria. At least dialogue has been generated by the recent Iraqi call for a unity pact.

These pressures would make sense from the Soviet point of view. Given Iraq's reputation, internal stability is important to the heavy financial investment the Soviets are making in Iraq and to the foothold they may hope to have vis-a-vis the Gulf. Cooperation among Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo is highly important to the protection of Soviet influence in Egypt and the Egyptian-Syrian flank.

Conclusions

1. Iraq is so basically unstable that it is difficult to gauge the durability and hence the significance of what present trends mean or whether they or the regime will last very long.
2. Despite Iraq's unreliable record and its strong fear of foreign domination, Iraqi-Soviet relations have improved under the current regime and Soviet assistance has peaked in ways besides military assistance that will entail long-term involvement (oil and a treaty).
3. However, the Soviets have been sacked before and they could be sacked again, but at a minimum they will exert influence because of the Iraqi need for assistance. To the degree that Soviet influence increases and results in further Soviet assets such as base facilities, much would seem to depend on (a) stabilization of the internal scene and a shared interest in Iraq's ambitions in the area and (b) juggling these against the protection of Soviet-Iranian relations.
4. At a minimum, the Shah is disturbed by developments in Iraq. A sharpened contest with Iraq would generate further instability in the Gulf.

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5. Iraq has the potential for trouble-making in the Gulf if it can adeptly use Soviet support, and the Soviets have greater prospects for increasing their influence if they move cautiously.

In terms of U.S. interests, oil investment and supply continue to give us a tie to Iraq despite the break in diplomatic relations. There are some who argue that we should make an effort to supplement this by expanded commercial ties where possible, but prospects for any general improvement in relations now seem slim.

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